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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

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U.S. Department of Agriculture
Thursday, August 16, 1934.

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "Facts About Chiggers." Information from Bureau of Entomology, U.S.D.A.

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The characters in fairy tales, if you remember your childhood reading -- the folks in fairy tales always had to be on the watch when they went to the woods. Some large, ferocious creature was almost certain to be lurking in the dark shadows ready to attack. It might be an ogre; it might be a dragon; it might even be "the big, bad wolf."

Fortunately in this real world of ours, we can go off to the woods to camp or picnic with no fear of attack from a monster. But the woods are still full of small enemies that we'll be wise to prepare against -- ogres in miniature, to be sure, but just as blood-thirsty and eager to attack as those big ones in the fairy books. For example, out in the woods anywhere we're likely to run into our old foe, the mosquito. Then, as we said last week, another dangerous woods enemy is the common tick. And in many parts of the country we're likely to have a great deal of trouble with an insect smaller than the head of a pin -- the well-known chigger or red bug.

If you've once been bitten by a chigger, you'll be especially interested in hearing a short biography of him. This information, let me tell you in advance, comes from Dr. F. C. Bishopp, of the Bureau of Entomology, who is an authority on ticks, chiggers and other insects that attack man and animals.

The tiny red chigger that raises those red itching lumps on your skin, is^{the} "biting baby" of a harmless large red velvet mite. That is, the chigger is the first or larval stage of this insect which, when adult, doesn't attack at all. The large mite lays its eggs in the ground in the fall. Soon after warm weather begins in the spring, the eggs hatch into chiggers, the hungriest tribe in the woods. They sit about on leaves and stems of plants or on grasses waiting for you or some animal or bird to come along and provide them with a meal. They usually feast on snakes, lizards and turtles or on small animals and birds. Chiggers are a very serious pest of chickens and turkeys and often kill young chicks or poults.

As we mentioned, the chiggers come out with the warm weather in the spring. In the extreme South they are often causing annoyance by the first of May. In more northern sections, they seldom appear before the middle of June.

Fortunately, chiggers don't exist in all parts of this country. If you are a New Englander or a New Yorker and stay at home, you'll probably never experience a chigger bite, for these insects don't seem to occur in the Northeast anywhere above southern Pennsylvania. And since they like damp places, you won't find chiggers in the desert or more arid parts of the country. They're thickest in the South, but may be troublesome in low bushy areas as far north as southern Minnesota and Wisconsin.

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Most people believe that chiggers actually burrow into the skin and stay there causing itching swellings. As a matter of fact, they simply take their meal as the tick does, by attaching themselves to the skin and sucking blood. But in order to get their dinner easily, they inject a poisonous material into the skin which causes blood to flow easily. It is this substance that starts the itching. When the chigger has filled up on blood, it drops off and changes to another stage in its growth, just as the tick does.

There, briefly, is the story of the chigger's life. The question now is how to avoid trouble with him. Dr. Bishopp says that in country heavily covered with woods and undergrowth, you can't hope to destroy all chiggers. But you can hold them in check around dwellings and camps by clearing away the underbrush and vines, by keeping grass closely cut, and by applying very fine dusting sulphur to the vegetation and grounds with a dust gun. About one pound of sulphur to 1000 square feet is enough. Sometimes one treatment of sulphur will be all that is necessary to drive out the chiggers, but usually you'll have best results if you repeat the application two or three times at intervals of one to two weeks. If rain has washed off the sulphur dust shortly after application, of course, you'll need to apply it again.

The scientists have found no sure way to protect people who go into "chigger country" against these insects. But they do know several precautions that will help a good deal. Leather leggings or high-top shoes over trousers will keep off many that would crawl up the legs. Then, dusting your body and your underwear with sulphur dust before you go out is a great protection. Chiggers dislike both sulphur and kerosene, so if you paint some kerosene oil around the top of your boots or if you brush a little over your outer clothing, that will make you less tempting to your enemies.

But you can also save yourself bites by heading for the bathtub the moment you get home. A good scrub with plenty of strong soap will dislodge chiggers that have already made their way to your skin. Lather your body freely with strong laundry soap or medicated soap. Let the lather stay on for about 15 minutes. Then use a brush over the whole surface of your body. Between the soap and the brush, you're pretty certain of getting off most of the mites that may have planned a good meal at your expense. If you're certain that you ran into chiggers, a more drastic method that the scientists say is practically sure-fire prevention, is to apply a little kerosene oil all over your skin a few minutes before you take a bath. This will spoil the chiggers' appetites. Chiggers are likely to settle down under knees, around waists and in other places where the clothing is tight. Give these spots special attention in bathing. And, of course, change your clothing -- all of it. Some chiggers may still be in your clothes, waiting their chance to get through to your skin.

Dr. Bishopp says he knows of no very good remedy, once those itching bites have developed. Some people use ammonia water; others strong salt water, soda water or cooling ointments. By all means avoid scratching. It simply increases the itching and may bring on an infection. Apply iodine or mercurochrome to infected bites.

